

# Historical Perspectives: Dr. Simisola Olayemi Onibuwe Johnson and Her Contributions to Dentistry and National Development

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## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to bring into historical perspective the contributions of Dr. Simisola Olayemi Onibuwe Johnson (Figure 1)<sup>1</sup>, one of the notable contributors to the development of dentistry in Nigeria. Dr. Johnson (later Chief) but popularly known simply as 'Simi Johnson' was born in Lagos State, Nigeria. She had her secondary education at the Church Missionary Society (CMS) Girls Secondary School, Lagos before proceeding overseas to attend the Sunderland Technical College, England and the University of Durham, UK from 1954 to 1957 where she qualified as a dentist.



**Figure 1: Chief (Mrs.) Simisola Onibuwe Olayemi Johnson**

Dr. Johnson together with (Mrs.) Grace Adaria Guobadia were the first female Nigerians to qualify as dentists. They both graduated from the University of Durham, UK in 1957. It is worthy of note that although both Drs. Johnson and Guobadia qualified the same year, Dr. Johnson obtained the Bachelor of Dental Surgery (BDS) and Dr. Guobadia the Licentiate in Dental Surgery (LDS). The latter was appointed earlier into the Nigerian Government service specifically on 22-10-1957 and registered with the Nigerian Medical Council on 19-11-1957.

Dr. Simi Johnson was appointed as Government Dental

1958 and was officially documentation of her contributions to dentistry, a few registered with the Nigerian Medical Council on

30/7/1958. She obtained the Diploma in Orthodontics

of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow, United Kingdom (DDO RCPS Glasgow) in 1966 making her the first Nigerian to obtain a postgraduate qualification in Orthodontics (MDCN, 1976). She was registered with the National Postgraduate Medical College of Nigeria in the Faculty of General Dental Practice (FMCGDS) in 1971 as a Foundation Fellow (Registration Number FFE-02/0496)<sup>2,3</sup>.

## Ancestral Links With Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther And Herbert Macaulay

Dr. Simisola Johnson is a direct descendant of the foremost nationalist, Herbert Macaulay who was the grandson of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther. A short exposition on Bishop Crowther would be appropriate here. Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther was about twelve years old when his small town, Osogun, now located in the present-day Iseyin Local Government of Oyo State, was raided in 1822, and he was captured along with his mother and several other family members and sold into captivity. He was passed from one master to another before ending up in a major slave market where he was sold to Portuguese slave traders. Their ship bound for Portugal was intercepted on 7<sup>th</sup> April, 1822 and all the slaves were set free but disembarked in Sierra Leone. There he learnt to read and write. In 1826, he was sent to the Islington Parish School in England and returned after about a year to attend Fourah Bay College, in Freetown, Sierra Leone as a pioneer student. He taught in the College after graduation but moved gradually to Nigeria from 1841 as part of the Niger Expedition. He developed expertise in local Nigerian languages. It was Bishop Crowther who translated the Christian Bible into Yoruba language and also began a compilation of a Yoruba dictionary. He also produced a primer for the Igbo language and another for the Nupe in 1860 as well as a full grammar and vocabulary dictionary of the Nupe, in 1864. In 1864, he was consecrated the first African Bishop of the Anglican Church and he received a Doctor of Divinity from Oxford University. He died on the last day of December, 1891<sup>4</sup>.

Dr. Johnson, like her forebear, was closely connected to Osogun (her ancestral root) all through her lifetime, and she at onetime provided a borehole facility for the community which was until then dependent on stream water or wells.

## Contributions Within Dentistry

While it will be futile to attempt a complete Surgeon in Lagos on 14-7-1958 and was officially documentation of her contributions to dentistry, a few registered with the Nigerian Medical Council on salient contributions will be highlighted.

## The National Postgraduate Medical College of Nigeria

The Faculty of General Dental Practice of the National Postgraduate Medical College of Nigeria was constituted in 1979 but was subsequently declared moribund in 1988 and finally suspended in 1989 for non-performance. It took the intervention of Dr. Simi Johnson (elected into the Board of the Faculty) and others to resuscitate it, and their request that was granted at the 43<sup>rd</sup> senate meeting of NPMCN held on December 8, 1994. Others who played prominent roles include Professor O. K. Alausa then Registrar of NPMCN who initiated the move, Dr. M. O. Taiwo (who later became the President of the College, January 2008 to December 2009), Late Major General (Dr.) K. Sho-Silva, Late Dr. (Mrs) G. A. Guobadia, Dr. K. Subair, Dr. S. O. Ebigwe, Dr. M.O. Osisanya, Dr. J.O. Oyelakin and Dr. Adeolu Okeowo<sup>5</sup>.

## Federal Government Service

She worked in the Dental Department after joining the Federal Government service in 1958. While working at the General Hospital, Lagos from 1958 to the early 1960's, her dental colleagues included Drs. Nestor Hollist (Later Professor), N. E. Henshaw, J. R. Ana, G. Obuekwe, Inyang, O. Ogundipe and Major Sho-Silva<sup>6</sup>. She later became Federal Chief Consultant Dentist attached to the Federal Ministry of Health, Lagos.

## Contributions to Dental Education and Training

Chief (Dr.) Johnson served as the Principal of the Federal School of Dental Hygiene and Technology. She was also for many years Associate Lecturer at the University of Lagos during its formative years, and helped in no small way to ease the scarcity of dental teachers and demonstrators at that time. Other teachers in this category who helped in nurturing the Lagos Dental School to maturity included Dr. Otun and Dr. Subair. Their role as clinical demonstrators and associate lecturers was to bring senior clinical dental students to the realities of dental practice outside the Lagos ivory towers. The students benefitted tremendously from their inputs<sup>7</sup>.

Chief (Dr.) Johnson was also on the international team of educators that wrote the proposal for the creation of the Dental school at Obafemi Awolowo University (then University of Ife), Ile-Ife in 1973. Other members of the team were Prof G. Nixon, Dean of Manchester School of Dentistry; Prof L. Hardwick, Prof T. A. I. Grillo, Prof A. Bankole, Dr. N. O. Hollist (later Professor), Dr. A. M. O. Olaniyan, Dr. J. R. Ana (later Professor), Dr. N. E. Henshaw (later Professor) and Dr. N. O. Ogundipe<sup>5</sup>. The school admitted the first set of students (nine) in September 1975.

## Contribution to the formation and growth of the Nigerian Dental Association

She joined other dentists who practiced in Lagos to form the Nigerian Dental Association in 1962. These include Dr. N. E. D. Obasi, Dr. Otun, Dr. N. O. Ogundipe, Dr. R. I. A. E. Inyang, Dr. Subair. Prof. J.R. Ana, Prof. N. E. Henshaw, Prof. J.O. Akinosi, Prof. F. E. Okoisor, Prof. J.O. Adenubi and Dr. Grace Guobadia<sup>8</sup>. She was elected Vice-President of the Association in 1977. She was honoured with the Distinguished Dental Practitioner award by the Nigerian Dental Association in 1994, during the tenure of Dr. (Chief) S. O. Ebigwe as President.

## Contributions Outside Dentistry

Chief (Dr) Johnson was a renowned politician and served as a member of the Nigerian National Assembly. She served as Minister for Social Development and Culture in 1983 during the Second Republic.

Chief (Dr.) Johnson served on various philanthropic organizations and she was a member of the Nigerian Red Cross and a Central Executive Council member of St John's Council of Nigeria. She was a member of the Zonta International Club, Lagos and also a Trustee of the Nigerian' Sickle Cell Association. She was President of the Lagos State Chapter of the National Council of Women's Societies. She served on the board of several companies and was Chairperson of Afribank International, Nigeria. She was National President of the Business and Professional Women of Nigeria from 1976 to 1981. She was a lover of music and a prominent member of the Nigeria Jazz Club<sup>9</sup>.

She was also a keen supporter of sports and the only female member of the Nigerian National Olympic Committee (NOC) that facilitated the participation of Nigerian athletes at the Munich Olympics in 1972.

## Conclusion

The contributions of this selfless, dedicated dentist, pioneer orthodontist, administrator, politician, sports enthusiast, music lover, socialite and philanthropist, Chief (Dr.) Simisola Olayemi Onibuwe Johnson, will forever be remembered within and outside the dental profession. She died at her residence in Palm Grove Estate, Lagos in 2000 at the age of 87 years. In the words of her daughter Gbemisola Shasore (as reported by Anyanwu, 2012)<sup>10</sup> "All her life, she was doing one thing or the other for charity. Her shoes are too big to step into."

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